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NO. A-160 June 11, 1954

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SUBJECT: Use of Navassa Island as a Naval Gunnery Target and
Relinquishment of United States Claims to the Island

TO: The American Embassy, Port-au-Prince

~~(See copy)~~

The Embassy's despatch No. 542 of May 3, 1954 recommends against a proposal by the U.S. Navy that the island of Navassa be utilized as a naval gunnery target. The Embassy's recommendation is based on the grounds that (1) such action might, by inflaming local public and official opinion, have a serious adverse effect on our relations with Haiti; (2) it would risk stimulating international criticism adverse to our interests; and (3) it might unfavorably affect the excellent cooperation the Haitian Government has been giving our Navy in other fields.

After careful consideration of this whole question the Department has found itself in accord with the Embassy's recommendation and has written a letter to the Secretary of the Navy enclosing a copy of the Embassy's despatch, stating the Department's agreement with the views therein expressed and suggesting that the Department of the Navy give careful consideration to the possibility of abandoning its proposal for using the island as a naval gunnery target at the present time and, if possible, seek a substitute target.

The Embassy has also taken the Navy's proposal as the occasion for suggesting in a separate despatch (No. 543 of May 3, 1954) that the Department give serious consideration to relinquishing its claims to sovereignty over Navassa in the interest of improving Haitian-American relations and in order to obtain the means of satisfying the Navy's desire to use the island as a gunnery target through incorporating a provision authorizing its use for such a purpose in the agreement by which sovereignty would be relinquished. The Embassy points out that the other two possible alternatives, namely, an active assertion of sovereignty or a continuance of the present disputed status of the island, are not as desirable as would be a relinquishment of U.S. claims to sovereignty because they would, respectively, provide a continuing irritant to Haitian-

GE-Mr. Boggs

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APPROVED BY:

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CLEARANCES:

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DEPARTMENT OF STATE INSTRUCTION

PORT AU PRINCE

SECRET

A-160

Page 2

~~RE:~~ American relations or result in immediate political repercussions in Haiti of an unfortunate nature.

~~REMARKS:~~

~~RE:~~ Relinquishment of U.S. claims to sovereignty over Navassa would require an Act of Congress or a concurrent resolution. Such legislative action could be sponsored by the Department or could be introduced directly by representatives of the Congress or the Senate. In the latter case, there is little chance that such legislation would prosper without the support of the Department of State.

Two years ago when it was thought that there was a possibility that legislation providing for the relinquishment of U.S. claims to Navassa might be introduced into the Congress, the Department of State asked for the views of the various agencies of the Executive Department of the Government having an interest in Navassa island towards a transfer of sovereignty. Only the Defense Department had any strong objections. By letter of May 6, 1952 the Deputy Secretary of Defense informed the Secretary of State that the Department of Defense considered that Navassa Island should remain under U.S. sovereignty for the following reasons:

"(a) It occupies a key position in the vital focal point of shipping between the ore and oil resources of South America and the United States.

"(b) It is highly probable that this island will be suitable for the evaluation of equipment which is the result of recent developments in the field of naval research.

"(c) Reliable operation of the lighthouse is more likely to be assured under United States rather than Haitian control.

"(d) Waiver of U.S. rights to Navassa might encourage demands concerning other small islands of the Caribbean, which in turn might have undesirable military implications."

The Treasury Department said that the unwatched automatic lighthouse maintained by the U.S. Coast Guard was its principal interest in Navassa, adding that it is of continuing importance for vessels plying between U.S. Atlantic ports and the Panama Canal. The Treasury Department stated

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DEPARTMENT OF STATE INSTRUCTION

PORT AU PRINCE

A-160

SECRET

Page 3

~~XX~~ its belief that the responsibility for the operation of this light should go with the sovereignty of the island and that "there is no reason to believe that the Government of Haiti is not able to assume this function." The Treasury Department concluded that, in the event of a transfer of sovereignty, Haiti should reimburse the United States in the amount of \$35,000 for the value of the Coast Guard property. It is to be noted that the Defense Department's doubt as to whether Haitian control would assure that the lighthouse would continue operating under present standards of efficiency does not appear to have been shared by the Treasury Department.

The Commerce Department, without making any judgment concerning the desirability of a transfer of sovereignty, underlined the Maritime Administration's interest in assuring that the lighthouse be adequately maintained if the island changed hands, and added that the Weather Bureau believed that conditions obtaining at that time did not justify the establishment of a weather station on the island.

The Department of Agriculture stated that the island had no agricultural value and therefore that that agency had no basis for offering comments, other than to suggest that due consideration be given the presence of the lighthouse on the island and the fact that the island is a breeding ground for birds.

The Department of the Interior stated that it had no jurisdiction over the island and hence no objection to a transfer of sovereignty.

It will be seen from the foregoing that the question of the continued efficient maintenance of the lighthouse and the use of the island as a breeding ground for birds would probably not prove serious obstacles to a transfer of sovereignty. The problem resolves itself therefore principally to the question of the usefulness of the island to the Department of Defense and to the effect which a relinquishment of sovereignty might have in stimulating requests by other countries that like treatment be given with respect to territories over which they had claims of sovereignty conflicting with those of the United States.

The Department has carefully and sympathetically considered the Embassy's suggestion and it recognizes the

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DEPARTMENT OF STATE INSTRUCTION
PORT AU PRINCE

A-160

SECRET

Page 4

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~~SUBJECT:~~ unquestionably favorable effect a relinquishment of sovereignty by the United States would have on our relations with Haiti and on world opinion. However, it believes that the two principal arguments against a transfer of sovereignty, as stated in the preceding paragraph, are sufficiently compelling to make it undesirable for the United States Government to sponsor enabling legislation at this time, even if it could be assumed, which is by no means certain, that the Congress would be likely to act favorably upon it.

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Even though political considerations counsel against its use by the Navy at this time as a gunnery target, there may well be other military uses it might serve in the future which might not be interpreted by the Haitians as such a forceful assertion of sovereignty. The island has been useful to the United States Government in the past for military or quasi-military purposes, as during World War II when a Coast Guard contingent was stationed there. Moreover, it is not certain that the Haitian Government, if it were to gain undisputed sovereignty over the island, would acquiesce in its use by our military forces in an unrestricted sense or, specifically, for shore bombardment which would neutralize it for any other purpose.

The most compelling argument against a transfer, and one of direct concern to both the Department of State and the Department of Defense, is the danger that it would give rise to demands from other countries in Latin America that we accord them like treatment with respect to territories over which they have claims conflicting with those of the United States. For example, it would prejudice our claims to a number of small islands and keys in the Caribbean, some of which have military or other value to the United States. It does not appear certain that if, as the Embassy suggests, we relinquished our claim to Navassa unilaterally and voluntarily and not in response to Haitian demands, other countries would not be encouraged to seek like favors. Haiti has protested its sovereignty for a hundred years and has asked us as recently as two years ago if we would consider relinquishing our claim. If we were to do so now, it is doubtful that President Magloire, whose strong personal interest in bringing it about is known to the Embassy (see Despatch No. 576 of April 2, 1952), could

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Page 5

~~XXX~~ politically resist taking some of the credit. In short,
~~XXXXXX~~ the Department is inclined to believe that, no matter
what precautions the United States were to take, a uni-
lateral relinquishment of sovereignty over Navassa might
unleash a host of demands from other countries.

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MURPHY, ACTING

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